

The Role of Religion in the Battle Space Since 9/11
(Patrick Sookhdeo, May 25, 2011)

Transcript available below

About the speaker

Dr. Patrick Sookhdeo, Ph.D. D.D. is the Director of the [Institute for the Study of Islam and Christianity](#), which conducts research into Islamic movements and trends in contemporary Islam, especially radical Islam and terrorism. Sookhdeo served as International Director of the [Barnabas Fund](#), a relief and development agency channeling practical help and support to Christian minorities. An author, lecturer, advisor and consultant on issues of war, conflict and society, Sookhdeo has been a Visiting Fellow at Cranfield University UK, Senior Visiting Fellow at the Defence Academy, UK, and a Fellow of the Security Institute UK.

He received his Ph.D. from London University, School of Oriental and African Studies, D.D. by Western Seminary, Oregon, USA, validated by University of Oregon, for work on Pluralism, and D.D. by Nashotah House, Wisconsin, USA (Anglican Episcopal) for work on human rights and religious freedom.

He received the Coventry Cathedral International Prize for Peace and Reconciliation in 2001 and the Templeton UK project trust prize for progress in religion for his caring evangelistic ministry in the east end of London in Spring 1990.

Sookhdeo is the author of [almost twenty books](#) on Christian persecution, interfaith relations, and the threat of Islamic terrorism. His most recent book is [The Death of Western Christianity: Drinking from the Poisoned Wells of the Cultural Revolution](#) (2017).

Other Westminster lectures

He has also spoken at Westminster on the subjects of:

1. [ISIS: Its Origin, Methodology and Objectives](#) (2014)
2. [Marked for Destruction: Christians in Syria and Egypt](#) (2013)
3. [From Benghazi to Damascus: Are We Losing the Ideological War?](#) (2012)
4. [Fighting the Ideological War Lessons from the United Kingdom and the United States with Dr. Patrick Sookhdeo at the Heritage Foundation](#) (2012)
5. [Dangerous Embrace: The United States and the Islamists](#) (2012)
6. [Responding to Islam: Lessons from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, and Bishop George Bell](#) (2012)
7. [Update on Afghanistan: A Security Briefing](#) (2010)
8. [Terrorism and Subversion on the Homefront](#) (2010)

A One-Day Conference

Key Bridge Marriott, Arlington, Virginia, May 25th, 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

The death of Osama bin Laden will significantly affect both sides in the war on terror. The most important questions now are how will al Qaeda and its associated movements respond to the death of their leader, and is the United States safer or in more danger today? The Westminster Institute is bringing together world-renowned authorities and national security practitioners for a one-day special

event in Washington, D.C. Together they will provide answers to these questions and also address the broader questions of what impact bin Laden's death will have on non-violent jihadists such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and what strategies can the U.S. employ to turn this battlefield win into a definitive victory.

For more on the role of religion in the battle space, see David Des Roches' Westminster talk, [Push and Pull of Religious Extremism: Who Are the Terrorists, How Are they Recruited, What Can We Do?](#).

Transcript

Patrick Sookhdeo:

Our focus is really the role of religion in the battle space, if we call it that. Looking at the terrorist groups, Al Qaeda, which I think some of us have studied in considerable depth. Most of us would have degrees of experience. Some of us are concerned with battlefield situations whether Iraq or Afghanistan, of course, we've had Libya and currently we are considering the position of Syria, and what exactly is the role of religion in battlefield situations, in counterterrorism, in counterinsurgency. How do we make sense of what is happening?

And so, well, politicians that make their comments, particularly about the Syrian context, how can we better understand what is taking place? It's one thing to know. It's another to understand. In the New Testament Greek, there are two words of knowledge, oida and ginosko. Oida is to know with the head, head knowledge. Ginosko is to know in the heart, out of experience.

And what I believe that we will be attempting to do today is to address both entities to increase your knowledge, so that we know what is happening but we want to take you further to help you to understand what is taking place, what are the forces at work, to try to get into the inside. But I hope that we can meet both of those two objectives.

So without much more ado, I am going to kickoff. Islamic terrorist attacks serve a clear and focused ideology, a set of beliefs that are evil but not insane. Some call this evil Islamic radicalism. Others, militant jihadism. Still others, Islamo-fascism. Whatever it is called, this ideology is very different from the religion of Islam. So said President Bush on the sixth of October 2005.

Five years later, President Obama in his National Security Strategy of 2010 said, "We reject the notion that Al Qaeda represents any religious authority. They are not religious leaders, they are killers, and neither Islam nor any other religion condones the slaughter of innocents." Very rightly, a distinction is made by both presidents, concerning terrorism and Al Qaeda as a terrorist organization from a religion, the religion of Islam.

So rightly, a distinction is made. The dilemma though is can you dismiss both entities absolutely or is one contingent on the other. And I believe that that is where the fundamental difficulty lies and what I want to do in my paper is really to address that.

Understanding a threat is key to being able to counter it effectively. The threat of violent Islamism poses to the West must be understood as a cultural battle, an ideological battle, and a theological battle. A correct understanding of ideology is only possible by means of a correct understanding of the theology that undergirds it. Looking at our misunderstanding, one can see one of the reasons that may be behind it. We tend to forget that behind an ideology is a theology.

It's very interesting, four months after 9/11, an individual – and we do not know his name but he produced a book called, “Through Our Enemies’ Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the future of America.” It's titled anonymous but published by a very reputable publisher. He in gathering material together came to the following conclusion, “Most Americans, experts, officials and civilians, have still not addressed the role of religion in bin Laden’s activities and message in a frank and analytical manner.” He went on to say, not so much demonizing bin Laden and his cohort, but how do we understand what actually shaped him and what motivated him?

So this issue of how we understand the role of religion in a battlefield context whether they be fixed battles which we’ve had to fight in Iraq or Afghanistan or whether it be battles with terrorism is fundamental.

After 9/11, Henry A. Crumpton, who was Deputy Chief of Operations of the CIA Counter Terrorist Center, was tasked by President Bush with defeating Al Qaeda and bin Laden. Crumpton recalls in his memoir, how he considered good Muslims to be America’s allies in the struggle against Al Qaeda and its affiliates. He wrote, “Our focus should be on Al Qaeda and their affiliates. We must define our enemy in very specific, very narrow terms. This is not a war against Islam. It is just the opposite,” and so he goes on.

Crumpton rightly affirms that Muslims must be our allies. But, how did he conceive that AQ had emerged from within the wider Muslim culture if he did not address that culture and, in particular, the theological basis of that culture? How did he envisage that Muslim allies could defeat them without tackling the religious ideology that motivated and drove bin Laden and his followers?

A few weeks after 9/11, Crumpton attended a briefing with President Bush at Camp David to discuss a strategy for a response against AQ in Afghanistan. After this briefing, the CIA analyst Emile Nakhleh described the theological impact of AQ on Muslims around the world. Nakhleh, a Palestinian Christian, had joined the CIA in 1993 and eventually became director of political Islam strategic analysis program in the Directorate of Intelligence. He too gave solo briefings to senior policymakers.

Nakhleh’s fascinating book, [*A Necessary Engagement*](#), written after his retirement in 2006, chose his focus on the ideology of Islamism, but seems not to recognize any link with the theology of Islam itself. He holds that Muslims living in a non-Muslim country should be able to reconcile their faith and their citizenship with these countries.

He fails to recognize that in order for them to do that, they either have to abandon the faith or dismiss it as something important or engage in a massive reinterpretation. Nakhleh appears to care mainly about whether any particular Islamic group accepts or espouses violence as a method of achieving their goals. He shows little interest in knowing what the goals are, an attitude shared by American policymakers whom he briefed. To focus on the means and not the end is extraordinarily shortsighted. Islamists all share the same aim: the creation of an Islamic state ruled by Sharia and this is an end result completely incompatible with freedom, equality, or democracy.

Daniel Pipes asserts that non-violent Islamists pose a greater threat than the violent ones. Again, Nakhleh writes about ideology, but didn’t about theology. Similarly, the 9/11 Commission Report recognized that the Al Qaeda ideology was a root cause of Islamist terrorism but refused to recognize that the ideology was itself rooted in a classical interpretation of the religion of Islam. I quote, “The enemy is not Islam, a great world faith, but a version of Islam. The enemy goes beyond Al Qaeda to

include the radical ideological movements inspired in part by Al Qaeda but has spawned other terrorist groups and violence. Thus, our strategy must match our means to two ends: dispatching the AQ network and in the long term, prevailing over the ideology that contributes to Islamist terrorists.”

Nevertheless, the report uses the word Islam 322 times, Muslim 145 times, jihad 126 times, and jihadist 132 times. In other words, it’s saying, let’s focus on the organizations, the structure, ideology is there, but let’s not grapple with what really is shaping that ideology. Crumpton was right in asserting that the U.S. and the West are not at war with Islam. And I want to reaffirm that. In no way is the U.S. and her allies in any way involved in a war with Islam as a world religion. The dilemma though is that whilst we can affirm that, how do we deal with the interpretation of a religion that deals with violence? At that point, we must address ideas.

If interpretations are rooted in hermeneutics, which has to do with how we understand and interpret a particular faith, then we cannot dismiss the faith and the religion. We cannot remove it from the equation. So there has to be a battle of ideas and it has to think through theology. So trying to win the battle of ideas without using theology is foolhardy. As Walid Phares has written, “A war of ideas is raging,” nevertheless, “behind the War on Terror. The outcome of the second is ineluctably conditioned by the consequences of the first.” In any conflict, it is necessary for the general to make his decisions based on realism not optimism. Unless we recognize the 13:08-13:12 radical interpretation of Islamic theology in motivating AQ, we impose a serious handicap on our counter terrorist efforts.

Donald Rumsfeld was much mocked in some quarters when in 2002 as Defense Secretary, he sought to distinguish between known knowns and unknown knowns but his realism and his humility in acknowledging the administration’s lack of knowledge and understanding and its lack of ability to change other people’s thinking should be commended. In 2009 he wrote, “If I were grading, I probably would say we deserve a D or a D- as a country on how well we are doing in the battle of ideas that is taking place in the world today.” In the 9/11 Commission Report, issued on 22nd July 2004, it had urged the need for the U.S. to use public diplomacy to counter resurgent ideology.

A year later, Karen Hughes, a former television reporter who had been a close advisor to President Bush, was appointed to head up efforts to achieve this despite the fact that she appears to have know background knowledge of Islamic theology, an ideology that she needed to counter. The lack of success in American public diplomacy in changing Islamist ideas can be attributed in part to at least to the irrelevance of some of the methods attempted. For example, the Radio Sawa, a 24-hour Arabic radio service, which in 2002 was launched to replace Voice of America, a 12-hour, content rich, Arabic service. What did it do? Play pop music both Arabic and Western. Robert Reilly, one of our speakers, commented on the situation. He said, “In the War of Ideas, performing a lobotomy on your on enemy might be a good move. It is almost unheard of to perform a lobotomy on yourself and then declare it a success. How would you like to have a superpower adolescent in your neighborhood?” It took a lot of courage for him to say that.

So, what evolved? Three elements of engagement, addressing three arenas. One was homeland security and the need to develop a counter terrorist strategy. The second, having to address the Muslim world and so, a strategy of engagement that had to do with public diplomacy. And a third, the battlefield situations where our forces found themselves armed and he particularly, the development of a counter insurgency program, COIN. They had to look at how they would engage the religion as well as the ideology.

As we saw earlier that religion was embedded in the CIA from a very early period, in fact, particularly from 1996 it seems also likely that religion played a part in the thinking of the FBI at a very early period. Ali Soufan was an FBI agent who addresses the issues of ideology and how he has sought to convince his own masters that they had to look at ideology and he in a recent article argued very strongly that the U.S. had failed to address the issue of ideology. But I believe he himself makes a mistake for when he looks at ideology, he sees it mainly as dealing with how the West is perceived. He looks at issues of alienation. What he does not do is address the issues of theological unpinning of the ideology. So I would argue that they've developed no overarching strategy either shortterm or longterm.

Well, over the years, experts were brought in to advise both President Bush and President Obama on how the U.S. should engage with the Muslim world, on how it should deal with Al Qaeda. This included academics, politicians, military, and even retired missionaries. Yet, despite all of these efforts, it is difficult to see a clear strategy emerging which would address the terrorist threat being faced in the U.S. and to develop both counter terrorist and a counter insurgency policy to respond to the situation in the Muslim world where some governments were allied to Islamist extremism where Islamist extremism was fast taking hold and developing to battlefield situations.

Of course, the U.S. had to have partners and so strategies began to develop both within the UN organizations like the OSCE and other international entities. The difficulty was how do you develop a longterm strategy, particularly in a country like the U.S.? Different contexts require different solutions. Politicians are only there for a fixed period. They can't plan twenty years earlier. They can't make structures which outlast them. Strategies can change, so multiple approaches can develop depending on the context and the time period but I would argue it left the U.S. vulnerable to uncertainty about how exactly to deal with AQ and Islamist extremism and may I say you see this a few days ago in Mr. Kerry's recent statement about the presence of Al Qaeda in Syria – or about the non-presence of Al Qaeda in Syria.

Now, they have developed also a strategy of separating violent and nonviolent Islamists. Here the problem is a confusing one. The Brookings Institute argued very strongly in 2010 that the U.S. was in a state of confusion in addressing the issue of Islamism and urged a major shift in policy so that the U.S. would engage with nonviolent Islamists. So at this point in time the thinking was, 'We cannot address Islam. We are now dealing with terrorists and there is an ideological basis. So we have got reconcilable Islamist or political extremist Islam.

Is it possible to focus on the extremists, divide them into two into the non-violent extremists and the violent extremists, support the non-violent extremists politically so they can take power (i.e., Morsi) and then use them to neutralize the violent extremists?' The idea here was to strengthen relationships with nonviolent extremists and potentially look to them coming to power to achieve stability in their countries and regions. I believe this was a very dangerous policy to engage in and to the degree it still shapes U.S. policies, particularly in reference to Saudi, Qatar, and what has happened basically in Egypt.

So we end up engaging with the wrong kind of Muslims. Instead of dealing with those that share our values, share our ethos, our fundamental principles, we engage and back those who seek our destruction. We also found ourselves in the U.S. following an outdated model, which I will not go too much into. In the UK, we founded not a Homeland Security, but a program, a strategy known as [Contest](#).

When Mr. Obama wanted to look at where the U.S. could go, he went to the UK, brought over one of the principal parts of Contest. The only problem was when Mr. Cameron came to power, he rejected Labor's understanding of Contest because it did not work. In fact, it bolstered the Islamists. And Mr. Obama brought over the defective version, which is there enshrined in the counterterrorist strategy. So you can begin to see the dilemma. Even using the position of General Petraeus who argued very much for culture, and then suggested we reconcile with the reconcilables, neutralizing the irreconcilables, utilizing Kilcullen's three pillars of insurgency. There is no [unintelligible] of religion. So the issue of misunderstanding religion by taking a secular approach became I believe quite fundamental for how the U.S. began to understand the role of religion over the past twelve years or so. I think part of this reason had to do with secularization.

Alan Judd, in a [review](#) of Peter Bergen's book [Manhunt: from 9/11 to Abbottabad](#), pointed out that only do secularists struggle to understand the immensely formidable power of personal religious belief, but also those who do it, grasp its potency, are quickly in danger of paralysis and despair as there seems no effective way to respond. "There has been a tendency, in the British bureaucracy at least," and I would say in the U.S. also, "to play down the religious and to play up everything else. This is partly because a secular culture finds it difficult to comprehend true religious enthusiasm and partly because, if you do admit it, you can see no end to it — there's nothing to negotiate."

So we ended up engaging with nonviolent extremists. In [unintelligible] began to take off in the U.S. The Department of Defense issued a directive concerning stability ops, which were to be provided by primarily by the U.S. Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command, commanded at that time by Maj. Gen. Herbert Altshuler. Altshuler described his unit's mission as "the bridge between the military commander on the ground and the civilian population in his area of operations. This includes the population, its leadership, elected, appointed or assumed, and the institutions of government and culture of that population."

So religion is not mentioned, but culture is mentioned. So religion was put under culture and it was embedded in science, which then became a part of STRATCOM. But I believe this had serious implications. Just very briefly, [I want to discuss] Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, we had the development of an engagement with religious entities, and for specific purposes we needed to engage with inside Hajj, provide [means] for people to get there safely, during Ramadan to ensure heating, electricity at critical times, provision of fresh meat, and a host of other areas.

But it went further. We needed to engage with ulemma and leaders, so we had to engage with them. With the ulema, we actually paid them to provide fatwas, which we then paid for to be circulated in media, press, etc., so we became vitally involved in the whole process of using religion both positively to bring the population on side, but also in terms of kinetic to neutralize the opposition.

Similarly in Iraq, Iraq began to use religion. For example, the mosque listening service on Friday to ascertain whether jihadist messages were actually going out, the distinction between Sunni and Shia, times and dates of the Muslim calendar, which attacks might come, people like Muqtada al Sadr, how he could be neutralized.

When it came to Libya, what did we do? Because we were to distance, we used surrogates, in this case Saudi and Qatar, so we ended up not defining the nature of the enemy, so those who we began to back, arm, and trained, turned out to be religious fanatics who took control with their various militias after Gadhafi fell, including [unintelligible].

And I believe we are now in a very similar situation in Syria, where I think your president, and in particular Mr. Kerry, has totally underplayed the significance of Saudi and Qatar, the significance of Al Nusra and the Al Qaeda elements, and so we are in a very strange alliance now with the very people that want to destroy us.

Of course, [unintelligible] spirit of time, a variety of responses have been made. For example, current Muslims to return to the [unintelligible] in Iraq because violence came in Armenia in the 13th century. Encourage Muslims to return to the Sharia, then they can be better people, not killers. Create a new lexicon in order to define religious terminology so it is not used against us. Reject all linkage between Islam and violence. Embrace the extremists in order to kill the terrorists. We have gone through these, but they are produced by [unintelligible].

Misguided Western Thinking

Also, there have been factors which controlled our thinking, how we should respond: political correctness, personal [unintelligible] guilt, wishful thinking, wars in the Islamic world influencing our policy decisions, misguided attempts to gain popularity in the Muslim world, the priority of searching for a quick fix.

In all of this, too, the military has had its own difficulties. They could not really develop a coherent, long-term strategy. They did have the personnel to do it. They could not be seen to be actively engaged in Islam because it could be counterproductive. You needed Top Secret security clearances. Where would you find them? We certainly did not have them. [There is] a whole host of areas that has not met the [unintelligible] of the military in developing a coherent strategy on religion.

So looking at where we are today, I would say there is an accidental engagement with Islamists that is currently taking place. Without realizing it, we are finding ourselves in bed with the Islamists and sadly, with AQ, the very organization we have longed to destroy. [unintelligible] as much as ideology (others will deal with it, I have a very lengthy paper), except to quote Zawahiri. He said this, "The strength of AQ is not in its leaders but in its ideology. It does not matter how many we kill. The ideology is what is now embedded within the hearts and minds of many."

The Backdrop of American History

So let me come quickly to my conclusion. I believe that American experience teaches us much about [unintelligible]. I believe you had to fight three religious wars, the Native Americans, the Civil War, and the American Revolutionary War. [Unintelligible]. It was a theological conflict. The Puritans entering New England saw themselves entering Canaan. They developed a theological justification for the suppression if not the extermination of the American Indian because it followed the pattern of Exodus and Leviticus, and [unintelligible].

So [unintelligible] how do you interpret scripture at that point? When you come to the American Revolution, there is also a theological undergirding, the Anglican Church, looking to the role of the monarchy, the divine right to rule. [unintelligible] you have got Presbyterian congregations and others interpreting [unintelligible]. If the magistrate is not good, you can actually overthrow him, so you have that theological conflict, apostasy from the Anglican Church, supporting the revolutionary cause. Even a twisted interpretation of scripture where David is seen to be the bad king and [unintelligible] is hanged by David. And it is the revolutionary [unintelligible] who wants to overthrow the kingdom.

We have been there before. When you come to the civil war, slavery, both sides interpreted scripture to suit their own particular positions. The U.S. had a backdrop of that history, and I believe that what happened in time [is] that you learned to deal with theology and with [unintelligible] theological interpretations, and you brought into being a theology based on freedom, values and virtues, and faith, a faith that was separated from the state.

The Way Forward

And out of that you created the kind of society today which is a model [for] the world. [unintelligible] recognized that, and my way forward is really four simple points. Firstly, study and learn from the lessons of American history. A theological justification used by devout American Christians with regard to their response to [unintelligible] Native Americans, in terms of slaves, white rulers, etc. fueled violence. Well, learn from that.

Secondly, having recognized this, refrain from facilitating dissemination of Islamist theology and ideology, which means we have to look at our relationships with Saudi [Arabia] and Qatar, which are proponents of those ideologies.

Thirdly, make proactive efforts to deconstruct this ideology and theology. The best way to do this is to support and strengthen the liberal movements. Fourthly, disable the institutions and individuals who propound this ideology by whatever means possible.

I have two minutes. Let me conclude.

Conclusion

An ideology that is derived from religion should not be treated as a no-go area for American policymakers. Indeed, the U.S. is uniquely aided to help the twentieth century Islam cut itself off from its Islamist accretions by sharing with Muslims the lessons that America herself has learned in the last four hundred years about finding theological support for horrifying injustices and violence.

I would say our message – I am not an American, but if I was an American, my message would be simply this. Learn from us. This ‘learn from us’ is a message of humility, not of pride. If the full message runs, we have been there, we got it wrong, we put it right, learn from our mistakes. Thank you.